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PREPARATIONS FOR THE FOURTH WORLD CONFERENCE ON WOMEN: ACTION FOR EQUALITY, DEVELOPMENT AND PEACE

Statement submitted by the International Council of Women, International Federation of Business and Professional Women, International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) and Soroptimist International, non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council, category I; Associated Country Women of the World, Commonwealth Medical Association, International Federation of University Women, Medical Women's International Association, World Association of Girl Guides and Girls Scouts and World Young Women's Christian Association, non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council, category II; and Centre for Development and Population Activities, Commonwealth Pharmaceutical Association, International Confederation of Midwives, International Council of Nurses and International Federation of Gynaecology and Obstetrics, non-governmental organizations on the roster

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 29 and 30 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1296 (XLIV) of 23 May 1968.

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* E/CN.6/1994/1.

A comprehensive human rights approach to women's health

It is widely recognized and accepted by competent medical authority that factors influencing the development of good health or the onset of bad health must be considered comprehensively, and that this requires an overview of their effects over the whole of the life-span, if they are to be properly understood and appreciated. Accordingly, the importance of considering health from a comprehensive and holistic perspective was fully recognized during the technical discussions on women, health and development at the World Health Assembly in 1992.

The need for such an approach is nowhere more obvious than in societies where discrimination is practised against women. Although born with a stronger resistance to adverse health factors than her male siblings, a woman's health in such societies begins to suffer almost immediately after birth as a result of her receiving far less than her fair share of food. Later she may be subject to harmful traditional practices, including female genital mutilation, the adverse consequences of which, if not immediate, certainly increase the risk of damage to her health during her child-bearing years.

Often forced to carry out a far larger share of heavy physical work than her brothers, she will be less likely than they to receive education. She will be unlikely to receive any sex education and may have little access to family planning education and services. She may be forced into early marriage and/or early child-bearing. The result can be death or complications which affect her health and reproduction throughout her life. Women have little decision-making ability about sexual encounters and virtually no control over the sexual behaviour of men. Therefore they are at greater risk of unwanted pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases and, tragically, HIV/AIDS.

All these factors contribute to the ill health which women in such societies suffer throughout the whole of their life-span, as a result of which it has been widely recognized and accepted that a fragmentary or segmental approach to women's health is wholly inappropriate. So damaging to a woman's health are these adverse factors that the elimination of discrimination against women must be accepted as the most important single means of improving their health status. This can be achieved only by enforcing their human rights.

The Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action (A/CONF.157/24 (Part I)) adopted in 1993 by the World Conference on Human Rights affirms "the importance of the enjoyment by women of the highest standard of physical and mental health throughout their life-span". It also reaffirms, "on the basis of equality between women and men, a woman's right to accessible and adequate health care and the widest range of family planning services, as well as equal access to education at all levels".

The non-governmental organizations listed above, as members of Advocacy for Women's Health urge the Commission on the Status of Women, in developing the Platform for Action of the Fourth World Conference on Women, to take a comprehensive view of women's health throughout the life-span and to give priority to the enforcement of women's human rights as the most important means of improving their health status.